

THE MEANS OF ESCAPING HIERARCHICAL SUPREMACY AS DEPICTED IN SELECT BLACK VERNACULAR FOLKTALES

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ABSTRACT

An analysis of the black folktales in the vernacular reveals the desire of the blacks to escape from social responsibilities, political domination, spiritual conflicts, physical violence, family commitments, punishment and ultimately slavery itself. Among these, escaping the hierarchical supremacy enjoyed by the whites ranks supreme. The black trickster tales of the vernacular literature are a good example for this. In such tales, various animals are employed to typify various characters and characteristics. In these tales, trickery is a common feature. Weaker animals trick stronger animals and thereby escape torture and dominations. The blacks, by coupling trickery with other means, try to escape from various dominations. Most of these tales were told during slavery and therefore serves as a major critique of the racist society. The blacks sought to escape from those who were placed at a higher position by the social hierarchy. The means they sought to escape are discussed below.

KEYWORDS: Vernacular, Hierarchical Supremacy, Trickster Tales & Trickery

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INTRODUCTION

An analysis of the black folktales in the vernacular, especially the trickster tales, reveals the desire of the Black community to escape hierarchical supremacy enjoyed by different sections of the society over them. The blacks, generally, sought to escape from the hierarchical supremacy enjoyed by Whites who acted as masters and the black women had to seek the same against black men who enjoyed such status in the social hierarchy. This paper analyses the different means sought to escape such hierarchical supremacy

REBELLION AS A MEANS TO ESCAPE

Blacks deported from Africa were forced to be under their white masters. Freedom from their oppressing masters is a much studied topic as far as the black literature is concerned, but the subtleties of it could be understood further if the folktales are studied more. The blacks sought to escape not just from their slave masters, but also from the established hierarchical supremacy that enabled the whites to be the bosses and the privileged class. This thought is highlighted in the trickster folktales in the form of coded messages. For instance, the tale “Why Dogs Always Chase the Rabbits” talks of the African Americans existing alongside the native and European Americans. More than the Native Americans, the European Americans cause much trouble to the blacks. While many Native Americans co-existed with blacks, the European Americans always threatened and disturbed them. In this tale, the whites are said to have settled with hound dogs:

“What pestered old rabbit more than all the rest was the white man’s dog. It wasn’t

Like the Indian dogs. It was...hound dogs...." ("Why Dogs," 10)

Here the attack undoubtedly is on the hunting and brutal attitude of the whites against the blacks. Unlike the Native Americans, the whites had cruel intentions. These hounds hunted all day and howled all night thereby, causing trouble round the clock. The black community attacks the whites as being troublesome and cruel all throughout. This tale also shows the different attitudes the blacks had towards slavery. Since slavery was not new to many of the Africans who, in their native land would have been tribal slaves, they accepted it as a matter of fact. But many of the tribal masters, once taken to the new land were forced to be slaves. They normally should have resisted it. The black vernacular folklore, through its coded message, conveys it. In "Why Dogs Always Chase the Rabbits," many Native Americans leave the vicinity at the arrival of the whites, but the rabbit does not. The old rabbit and the squirrel family decide to fight it out for some more time. The tale says,

"Then all the critters packed their Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes in their pillow cases

And get ready to move, because they know that Mister White Man came for to stay,

And he ain't one of the kinds that want to be crowded. That is all of 'em except Old

Rabbit and the Squirrel family." ("Why Dogs," 10)

Though the squirrel and the rabbit are susceptible to the attacks of the hounds, they decide to challenge it. In the animal kingdom, stronger animals are above the weaker ones in the hierarchy. Thus, the hound enjoys hierarchical supremacy over the rabbit and the squirrel. But both these weaker animals decide to rebel. In reality, the blacks may not be able to challenge and overcome their white masters, but in their stories the weaker animals which typified them always won. They made these weaker animals competitors and winners thereby deriving emotional satisfaction. Here the means to escape is rebellion. In the end the rabbit, in its attempt to drown the hound ends up being chased up and down the country by the hound. Ultimately, it finds a hunter whom it convinces to shoot the hound. The powerful hound gets killed by immoral means. The weaker animal plots the kill of the stronger one. The rabbit en route escapes from the hierarchical superiority held by the hound. When the tale ends, the rabbit and its mistress have a peaceful sleep.

In this tale, the white man's entry into the black settlement reminds of the white encroachment into the lives of the Black to trouble them. The whites arrived at the shores of West Africa as early as 16th century to take slaves to America. Many blacks were displaced from their homeland. The slave masters hunted them like hounds and throughout the middle passage, treated them mercilessly. Down the history, there were rebellions from blacks to escape slavery and white supremacy. The rabbit in this tale does exactly the same. Its means of escaping from it its troubler was by rebelling and plotting. Therefore, rebellion was one of the ways of escape sought by the slaves.

If it is the rabbit versus the hound in "Why dogs always chase rabbits," it is the rabbit versus the lion in "Compair Lapin and the Little Man of Tar." The lion, generally considered the king of the beasts, is challenged by the wily rabbit. Rebellion is again projected as the means to escape hierarchical superiority enjoyed by the stronger lion. The tale begins with the idea that God created all animals unique and distinct and not inferior or superior:

"God ordered them not to eat each other, nor to destroy each other... and it

Pained him when they killed each other." ("Compair Lapin," 33)

God instead asks all animals to eat the same food: grass and fruits. If God asks all animals to eat the same food,

they predominantly were meant to be equal. Thus the Blacks, no doubt sought to reinforce the idea that God created all equal. Equality, they believed, was created by God and hierarchy by man. In this tale, the animals refuse to obey the creator, instead, start eating each other. Animals like the bear and the tiger ask the rabbit to submit because it was comparatively weak. The picture of the rabbit being taken bound reminds the readers the deportation of the blacks in fetters from Africa to the new land. Even when chained, the rabbit says, “I have not lost all hope” (36) In this tale too, the rabbit lies to the lion and having the fox for its ally, escapes. Such escapes may not be justifiable or believable, but no one could prevent the Blacks from causing the weaker rabbit to escape. Cunningness and deception is the means of escaping hierarchical supremacy. En route to his escape, the rabbit rebels against dominance and government and resists all claims of superiority by the stronger ones.

MATERIAL PROSPERITY AS A MEANS TO ESCAPE

Another tale often included in a black folktale collection is the tale of the “Clever Jack.” As the title suggests, Jack the central character by being clever outwits the king. Jack a poor man tries to equal the king, if not replace him, in status. He does so by trying to accumulate much wealth. The tale introduces Jack as a very poor man, a condition reminiscent of the blacks in America. While some accept it as their lot, Jack thinks otherwise and decides to become rich. In a country where the Blacks were denied education, freedom of expression and recognition, the chances of accumulating wealth was always minimal. But, at least in their stories, they could make their weak heroes wealthy. The vernacular folktales often portray their weaker character accumulating wealth by unjust means. It is to be noted that, the Blacks were not bothered of telling tales that showcased moral values. Moral principles, at times, mattered little while living in a ruthless society. The aim of the tale bearers was to tell subtly that they were not inferior to the Whites. To equate themselves with their more dominant masters who are placed at the top of hierarchy, attaining material prosperity is seen as one of the ways. In reality, during the period of slavery, blacks who were owned by wealthier white masters thought their master’s greatness was transferable to them. Such slaves looked at other slaves owned by humbler owners disdainfully. The prospect of blacks accumulating wealth also was bleak. They could glory in their master’s wealth alone. But, at least in the folktales, the black story tellers got their heroes to grow rich so as to equal themselves with their wealthy masters. Thus, whatever could not be achieved in real life was achieved in their stories.

In this tale too, Jack instead of crying over his misery, turns situations around. He starts out as a poor man and then is subjected by the king of the country (referring to Whites) to occupations such as herdsman (Cattle Keeper) and gardener. Trickery is once again the central concept in this tale. By constantly fooling the king, the poor Jack becomes rich. He makes wealth out of both the occupations. Such renditions of stories were meant to encourage the Blacks to change situations into their favour and not wait for changes to take place automatically. As the story progresses, the king attempts to get rid of Jack by killing him. Again, “Clever” Jack escapes. In the end, he returns from Europe mocking at the king’s verdict which read, “...I don’t ever want to catch your feet on my land anymore.” (53) He comes riding on a chariot similar to that of the king. His feet do not touch the ground, instead, he returns having increased his status and thereby implying he has reached a higher ground similar to that of the king.

A similar case of confronting a king of a nation is seen in the tale called “Jean Sotte.” Jean Sotte, the main character is described as a fool. “He was so simple that every one made fun of him. He would light the lamp in the daytime, and put it out at night.” (“Jean Sotte”⁵⁴) He is immediately identified with the weak black man who was considered intellectually weak and foolish. The king summons Jean Sotte to his court so that he can amuse his courtiers.

Often the Blacks were used as objects of amusement and entertainment by the Whites. To satisfy White slave owners, blacks even had to undergo lynching. This tale therefore identifies the foolish Jean Sotte with Blacks. But as the tale progresses, the king says, “I believe that you are not so foolish as you want to make people believe.” (“Jean Sotte,” 55) This implies that the Blacks though perceived to be fools, in reality, are not fools but have enough wisdom to confront the Whites. Jean Sotte does outsmart the king by answering his riddle. He moreover throws a riddle to the king who boasts, he knows everything in the world. The White men’s attitude that they are superior in wisdom is frowned upon here. In the end, Jean Sotte gets the king’s daughter for a wife, the kingdom itself and all of the king’s fortune. He thus equals the king by possessing the wealth of the king. Material prosperity elevates his status. In the end, Jean Sotte’s name is changed to Jean l’Esprit. From being John the fool he is accepted and addressed as John the spirited.

“The Son Who Sought His Fortune” is another Black Vernacular tale in which, the youngest son of a king leaves his father’s kingdom in search of fortune. The king finds all his three sons to be smart and finally decides to hand the kingdom over to his eldest son who enjoys the hierarchical supremacy. Instead of wallowing in disappointment, the youngest son breaks free from the family and travels to distant foreign lands. Finally, he settles in a country where, with the help of a wise man (conjurer), he marries the daughter of that country’s king. He gathers much wealth, marries the princess and thereby becomes the heir to the throne of that country. The son, though deprived of kingship in his native country, by means of finding fortune and fame equals himself to his elder brother who is the king in his homeland.

Most of the tales that talk of financial prosperity as a means to escape supremacy have the central character escaping or displacing himself to a foreign land. It is in this foreign country that their fortunes are changed and they rewrite their destiny. As much as it is important to talk about the physical escape, so much is it important to concentrate on the shackles these character wanted to free themselves from. The main idea of mentioning these characters finding fortune in foreign lands could be to motivate the Blacks to find their fortunes in the foreign country they are in. They wanted to escape from the hierarchical supremacy that at times seemed unjust and inexplicable. How could the colour of the skin, the gender, the profession or the age of a person decide supremacy? Why should it be a norm that the weaker should serve the stronger when the weaker ones have their own strengths? What is the basis for categorizing the weaker and stronger ones? Such questions are raised in these tales.

WISDOM AS A MEANS TO ESCAPE

In the tale “De ways of de Wimmens” the interesting case of the status of Black women is discussed. While universally, women are given a lower status than that of men, the Black women feel more deprived because of the two-fold subjugation: as a Black and as a woman. In the social hierarchy, men are placed higher than women, and consequently, husbands enjoy hierarchical supremacy over wives. It may be argued, God designed it that way. But this tale, goes back to the very same story of creation where God creates Adam and later brings Eve as a helper to him. The author tailors this story to his convenience to illustrate his point. In this tale, God says, he created both man and woman equal:

“De Lawd frown den. “Adam!” he say. Is you trying to criticize de Lawd?

Course you’sof de equal strength. Dat de fair way to make a man an

woman so dey both pull; in the harness even.” (“De Ways,” 6)

After creating them, the Lord puts them in a beautiful garden in which there is a house. The trouble begins there. When the woman asks man to fix the stove while she hangs the curtain, he refuses. This results in a scuffle in which,

neither of them wins because God has created them equal. Following this, the woman starts howling and blabbering which terribly upsets man. He is not able to howl like her. He thus approaches God for a solution. God makes him more muscular and stronger. He thus uses his prowess to show himself as the boss in the house. In turn, Eve following the counsel of the devil obtains the keys for the kitchen and bedroom from God. Now she alone can open them. She thus gets man to cut wood and patch the roof to open both these rooms. The story, though funny, suggests that Man's supremacy was earned (from God) while woman's supremacy stealthily obtained (through devil's counsel). Though intimidated by man, the woman still finds a way to dethrone him. By holding the keys of the kitchen and the bedroom, the woman establishes her supremacy at home and thereby sends man to find supremacy in the world outside. Moreover, the woman also gets the man to use his physical prowess to complete certain manual labors instead of employing it against her. All these are achieved by being smart and wise in spite of her limitations. Her wisdom helps her escape from the hierarchical supremacy that men have and therefore avoid domination.

The story "Sis 'Coon Shows Brother 'Coon Who's the Boss" again talks of power in social relationships like the one between a husband and a wife. Here 'coon refers to raccoon which is a medium sized mammal Brother Coon and Sister Coon are described as poor, industrious people who leave for work early in the morning. While they leave their children at home and go for work, Brother Bear comes and eats up all their victuals. When Sister Coon decides to stay at home the next day and watch with the axe for the bear, Brother Coon orders her to go to work. He says, "Ain't you my wife? Well, you do like I tell you." ("Sis 'Coon" 103) Brother Coon tries to establish the hierarchical supremacy a husband has over his wife. Sister Coon obliges to her husband only to return home that day and find that Brother Coon too was so scared of the bear that he had fled the place allowing the bear eat off their victuals that day too. The next day, in spite of her fear, Sister Coon obliges to the orders of Brother Coon to stay home to tackle Brother Bear. Brother Bear comes and knocks the door. Sister Coon opens it and immediately splits his head open with her axe. The story ends with the following lines,

"And after that, Brother 'Coon don't order Miss 'Coon around these days, but from that day on Brother 'Coon he done been a plum henpecked man." ("Sis 'Coon," 103)

Often problems at home are solved by women rather than man and this ability gives her supremacy over her husband at home. Like the case in "De ways of de Wimmens," men are asked to find supremacy in the world outside rather than at home.

CONCLUSIONS

While escaping slavery is seen as a dominant motif in African American Literature, the vernacular literature of the blacks, especially the folktales give good insights into other escapes that the enslaved blacks wanted to have. Escaping the hierarchical supremacy enjoyed by whites and also by men over women is something the blacks wanted. This desire is best expressed in their folktales where they make their weaker heroes who are placed below in the hierarchy to trick, cheat, outsmart and eventually triumph over others placed above them in the order. In all such tales the weaker heroes (usually animals) typify blacks who are seen as inferior and powerless and the seemingly stronger heroes typify white masters and slave owners and in specific cases, black men themselves who try to belittle black women. On the whole, the vernacular folktales use subtlety and skill to weave stories with hidden meaning and disguise. The emotional satisfaction of getting their weaker heroes to win gave the enslaved blacks momentary escapes and thereby strength to continue their life under

servitude.

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